

Hindutva

The word 'Hindutva' is derived from the two words 'Hindu' and 'tattva'. 'Tattva' literally means 'truth' and philosophically 'true principle'. Thus, 'Hindutva' means 'Hindu truth' or 'Hindu true principle'. What is this Hindu truth or true principle? What is its discourse? What does it signify? Who advocate the Hindutva?

The word Hindutva was first used by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) in his work *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1923). Its discourse has firm roots in Hindu nationalism which emerged to encounter the challenges of European colonialism, including the anglicisation of Indian history and culture. Colonialism played a significant role in codifying and reifying religious and social divisions. Generalised ideas about 'Hinduism', Hindu law, Muhammadan law, caste and religious minorities were part of the conceptual and political vocabulary during colonialism.

Hindu nationalism aimed at strengthening Hindu solidarity, and sought to identify an Indian nation according to ethnic criteria. Advocates of Hindu nationalism argued that the national identity of India could be regained by seeking the fundamental religious and cultural truths again. They idealised an imagined past and demanded a return to the pristine forms of Hindu culture that had degenerated under foreign rule. They also preferred an antagonistic world view. Works by 'Orientalists', such as William Jones (1746-94) and Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765-1837), and theories about the essentialist attributes of India were used to confirm the unique achievements of Hindu civilisation. The Orientalist idea of 'Western rationalism' and 'Eastern spirituality' was reformulated by Hindu intellectuals. Thus, for Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the greatness of India is manifested in its spiritual superiority. He says, 'Up, India, and conquer the world with your spirituality...Spirituality must conquer the West...We must go out, we must conquer the world through our spirituality and philosophy'.

The discourse of Hindutva was also affected by a communal memory, an imaginary sense of belonging, Christian and Muslim proselytising movements and by the (monotheistic) concept of a unifying religious scripture. Thus, the Hindu scholar Swami Dayadananada Saraswati (1824-83) believed in the infallible authority and eternity of the Vedas. In *Light of Truth*, Saraswati speaks of the 'source of false religions' and criticises the Bible, Christianity, Islam, the Quran and rituals that corrupted the unadulterated faith of 'Hinduism'. In 1875, He founded the Arya Samaj ('Society of Nobles') which played an important role in evoking Hindu traditionalism and reinforcing divisions between Muslims, Hindus and Christians in India.

The other influential Indian thinker is Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) who says that 'all great awakening in India, all her mightiest and most vigour have drawn their vitality from the fountainhead of some deep religious awakening'. This 'religious awakening' is based on the Vedas which, according to Aurobindo, have an esoteric meaning. For him, Hindu 'nationalism is not politics but a religion, a creed, a faith'. This nationalism is not secular but 'a religion that has come from God'. Thus, 'Hinduism' is 'the most tolerant and receptive of religious systems' and 'is not sharply exclusive like the religious spirits of Christianity and Islam'. This 'Hinduism' is 'a non-dogmatic inclusive religion and would have taken even Islam and Christianity into itself, if they had tolerated the process'. The true path is based on the Bhagavat Gita which is 'the greatest gospel of spiritual works ever yet given to the race'. India is the ancient Mother and had the greatest civilisation. It is great in religion, philosophy, science, literature, art, commerce, poetry and craft.

In *The Future of India*, Vivekananda speaks of the religion of patriotism and identifies 'Mother India' with the supreme God. He says, 'So give up being a slave. For the next fifty years this alone shall be our keynote – this our great Mother India. Let all other vain gods disappear for the time from our minds. This is the only God that is awake, our own race...All other Gods are sleeping'. This 'God' of Vivekananda's 'race' has destined India to be the teacher of humanity in the spiritual realm because 'Hinduism' is 'the mother of religions'. Not only that, but 'only Vedanta could triumphantly stand against the faith-killing, heartless rationalism of modern science; only Vedanta could lead men to salvation'... In India religious life forms the centre, the keynote of the whole music of national life'. Thus, Vivekananda 'sought to place Hinduism within the context of resurgent nationalism' and emerged 'as a proponent of a strong, virile and militant ideal of the Hindu nation'.

It was, however, the radical thinker Savarkar who invented and elaborated the idea of Hindutva. Savarkar was a nationalist campaigner and Hindu political leader. He is considered by many Hindu nationalists as the inspirational symbol of Hindu politics. He articulated a chauvinistic idealism of Hindus and perceived India as a Hindu nation or *Hindu Rashtra*. He opposed the 'Quit India Movement' which commenced in 1942 as a civil disobedient movement in response to Gandhi's call to 'do or die' for the independence of India. He then criticised the Indian National Congress for its policy toward the partition of India.

In *Hindutva*, Savarkar says that 'Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva'. 'Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being of our Hindu race'. Hindu is 'the name that this land and the people that inhabited it bore from time so

immemorial that even the Vedic name Sindhu is but a later and secondary form of it'. This means that the 'Hindu' is the patriotic inhabitant of India, presuming transcendence beyond religious identity. Savarkar emphasises the need for patriotic and social unity of all Hindu communities. He describes Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism as belonging to one big 'Hindu' family. For him, the Hindu nation stretches across the entire Indian subcontinent from Afghanistan to Burma. The Hindu nation suffered because of Muslims and Christians who invaded India and who still do not consider India as their holy land.

In January 1924, Savarkar founded the Ratnagiri Hindu Sabha aiming to work for the social and cultural preservation of Hindu heritage and civilisation. This organisation merged into the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha which was founded in 1915 to counter the Muslim League and the secular Indian National Congress. Savarkar advocated the use of Hindi as a common national language and against caste discrimination and untouchability. He then wrote *Hindu Padpadashashi* to eulogise the Maratha Empire, a 'Hindu' state that existed from 1674 to 1818.

In 1925, the vice president of the Mahasabha, Keshava Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940) founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or the 'National Volunteers' Union'. This organisation adopted the ideology of Hindutva and claimed to safeguard the spiritual and moral traditions of India. The RSS thinks that 'Hinduism' is not a religion but a way of life and that India is the primordial source of human civilisation from where its knowledge spread to the rest of the world. This involves changing what is perceived to be distortions in the history of India as taught in Indian learning institutions. The assumption here is that many works on 'Indian studies' are biased or spurious because the primary sources were produced by colonial scholars.

The ideological discourse of Hindutva was enhanced by the foundation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1980. The BJP depicts itself as a champion of the religious, social and cultural values of India's Hindu majority. It advocates conventional social practices and strong national defence. The BJP's ideology was further manipulated in 1986 when the Rajiv Gandhi's government used its parliamentary majority to overturn a Supreme Court's verdict in the Shah Bano case. Shah Bano was a 62 years old Muslim mother of five children. She was divorced by her husband and had no means to support herself and her children. The Supreme Court ruled that Shah Bano be given maintenance money. Orthodox Muslims protested and claimed that the Court had intervened in their Muslim Personal Law. Thus, the Indian government passed an act that nullified the Supreme Court's judgement. This led many Hindu nationalists to assert that Muslims do not consider India as their country and do not respect the laws of the country. This also provoked the

advocates of Hindutva to criticise the Indian legal system that they see to be favourable toward the minorities. They mention different standards for Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Therefore, a 'Uniform Civil Code' would abolish religious provisions for different communities.

The other major case, which Hindu nationalists manipulated to augment the ideology of Hindutva, was the clash over the 16th century Mughal Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. The Mosque was built by the Mughal emperor Babur (1483-1530) allegedly by destroying a Hindu temple that marked the birthplace of the Hindu God-Emperor Rama. Eventually, the mosque was destroyed by a Hindu mob in 1992 and then atrocities were committed against Muslims and Hindus.

Hindutva has come to be identified with the ideology of the RSS and the BJP. Hindutva, as Prakash Karat says, perceives the Indian nation 'as an ancient entity which has survived through the ages'. It 'sees the nation not in terms of language, territory, economy, culture and classes but on the basis of religion and its cultural attributes'. This means that Hindutva is a syncretic discourse that constructs a nationalist identity based on the traditions and cultural heritage of the Indian subcontinent. It, however, relies on Hindu philosophy and reinterprets Hindu scriptures.

The ideology of Hindutva is mainly concerned with the strength and unity of Hindus as a political community not with their religious observance. It does not impose a view of Hindu religion on religious practitioners or punish Hindus who violate the 'doctrines' of 'Hinduism'. Rather, it wants to develop and strengthen the power of the Hindu community.

Religion and homeland are unified in the Hindutva discourse. Hindutva supposes that the Indian subcontinent is the homeland of the Hindus. The Hindus are those who consider India to be their holy homeland. The Hindus are those whose religion is indigenous to India. This includes Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and those who are usually called Hindus.

Hindutva constructs its own model of Indian history. 'Hinduism', for instance, is an Indian entity that has no historical beginning. Vedic religion and Indo-Aryan languages, such as Sanskrit and Prakrits, did not come from Central Asia along with the Aryans. The Indus Valley civilisation was Aryan. Aryan culture was transferred from India to Iran. Indo-European languages had originated in India. The ancient past witnessed material prosperity, social peace, political justice, scientific progress, religious toleration and spiritual enlightenment. Madhav Sadashiv Golwalker says, 'We were the good, the enlightened people. We were the people who knew about the laws of nature and the laws of the spirit. We built a great civilisation, a great culture and a unique social

order. We had brought into actual life almost everything was beneficial to mankind’.

Hindutva represents a utopian attempt to unify the majority of the Indian citizens under a homogenised category called ‘the Hindus’. It symbolises ‘a sense of grievance against alleged injustices’ done to the ‘homogenous’ Hindus ‘in the past by an excluded homogenous minority’. This means that the ‘Hindus’ have been oppressed in their homeland by invading forces like the Muslims and the Christians. Golwalker says, ‘But the invaders who came during the last ten or twelve centuries could not be driven out. They could not be absorbed either. They remained a separate entity and ruled as foreigners in this land’. For the Hindutva ideology, the ‘Muslim era meant death and destruction as well as cruelty, forced conversions, religious repression and economic collapse’. Therefore, the influence of the ‘foreigners’ has to be reversed. Reversing ‘foreign’ influence includes demands to convert disputed monuments into temples.

The Hindutva movement portrays its organisations as the unrivalled forefront of a new age of national revival and reawakening. Recent historical wrongdoings will be corrected and the Hindu society will be reinstated to its earlier supremacy. The idea of an imminent reconstruction of Hindu glory and power forms the ideological essence of Hindutva. Golwalker says, ‘Our one supreme goal is to bring to life the all-round glory and greatness of our Hindu Rashtra’. He, then, says, ‘The ultimate vision of our work, which has been a living inspiration for all our organisational efforts, is a perfectly organised state of our society wherein each individual has been moulded into a model of ideal Hindu manhood and made into a living limb of the corporate personality of society’. Thus a communal memory is constructed, idealised and imagined as part of Hindu identity to boost political interests. The rise of Hindu nationalistic movements happened mainly because of their ability to capitalise on idealistic paradigms and material and social misfortunes among marginalised segments of Indian society.

The Hindutva discourse strives to assemble, homogenise and reify the diverse identities of social communities. It is a means to prevail over the religious, social, linguistic and regional diversity of India by affirming a shared cultural heritage. It is a political aggregation of ideas related to state power and the rearrangement of power relations. It manufactures a primordial version of Indian history, conceptualises a national ‘golden age’, affirms contemporary backwardness and disunity and envisions a moral and social revitalisation. This means that the ‘Hindus’ became powerless over time because of the ‘foreigners’ and that a ‘Hindu nation’ must be created to safeguard the rights of the Hindus in ‘Hindustan’ and regenerate Hindu culture.

Hindutva is an ideology that has deep historical roots in Indian response to European colonialism. It is an exclusivistic doctrine concerned with promoting integration and a sense of nationhood among Hindus. It claims to speak for the Hindu majority in India. This has been largely motivated by demonising minorities especially Muslims.

The Hindutva ideology provides a cultural paradigm of history. It claims that India is a Hindu homeland, traceable to an exceptionally primordial and advanced Hindu civilisation. This majestic Hindu civilisation ended in a series of foreign interventions, initially by Muslim invasions, followed by British colonialism and through the humiliating policy of the pseudo-secular Indian National Congress. This means that the glory of ancient Hindu society had been eclipsed by a lack of national unity and self-confidence. Thus, national revitalisation can be carried out by unifying, strengthening and reawakening the Hindu nation.

Hindutva provides its adherents with explanations for events and developments in Indian history. It aims at constructing an identity by defining and situating the categories of Hindu self and non-Hindu other. It is political and preoccupied with organising, mobilising and empowering Hindus.

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